

The Good Christian's Gain by DEATH.

74
A
SERMON

PREACH'D at the
PARISH-CHURCH
OF

Aswarby in Lincolnshire,

On SUNDAY, *October 9, 1726.*

Occasion'd by the Decease of the Honourable
Lady WHICHCOTE, the late Worthy Consort of
Sir FRANCIS WHICHCOTE, Bart.

By JOHN MASON, Rector of that Church,
Prebendary of *Litchfield, &c.*

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T O
Sir *FRANCIS WHICHCOTE*
O F
Aswarby in Lincolnshire, Bart.

HONOURED SIR,

SO many Reasons had got you the Property of the following melancholy *Discourse* ; that I am now sensible, I owe You a publick Satisfaction, for my having been so long unwilling to venture it abroad, against your Desire. I should indeed have taken it for a most obliging Command, especially since it came before You had heard, or read, one Word of the *Sermon*.

A

I only

I only beg, that my Fault may be mitigated, upon the Account of those Considerations, suggested by the Sense of my own Incapacity, which could not easily bear the publishing of such a Performance, composed, after a short Warning, in some Hurry, for a Country-Audience, and upon a Text containing a Matter most common, and handled before, it may be, ten thousand Times. Above all, I feared, the *Picture* I had attempted, tho' with all the Sincerity, and best Intentions imaginable, was not drawn by my weak and trembling *Pencil*, with the lively, natural, lasting *Colours*, which the Noble *Original* so justly deserved.

However, having said nothing but Truth, tho' not all, I may expect, that those, who knew the great Endowments and Virtues I touch'd, will charitably forgive what is wanting; and that even the Strangers, who happen to read the Character I give, will easily represent to their Imagination, how Praise-worthy was the Subject, I endeavoured to delineate.

I heartily

DEDICATION. iii

I heartily wish, *Sir*, I could better contribute to the perpetuating of the Memory and Honour due to that solid Merit ; as you effectually do, by erecting a much more lasting *Monument*, which at the same time shall be, to the most remote Posterity, a full Evidence of your sincere conjugal Love, Esteem, and Value for so dear and worthy a *Consort* ; as what You have done in *Her* Life, and at *Her* Funeral, is a certain Proof of the same to the living Witnesses.

GOD grant, that it may not be also your *Monument*, but after the longest Course of as happy a Life, as this World can afford with the Divine Blessings ; till You change it for the Heavenly never-fading Glory.

I am, with the most profound Respect and Gratitude,

Honoured S I R,

Your most humble, obedient,

and obliged Servant,

J. MASON.

THE BRITISH MUSEUM



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PHILIPP. i. 21.

To Die is Gain.

THE mournful Apparels, which this Day appear in this holy Place, call aloud for an earnest serious Meditation upon *Death*, which every one of us must necessarily expect in his Turn, and which has lately cut off the great Blessing we enjoyed in the Life of that Honourable Lady, in whose *Memory* these Tokens of Sorrow were so generously given by her most afflicted *Consort*.

For that necessary pious Meditation, and that we may be the better enabled to encounter *Death* with Courage and Comfort, I have chosen the Words of *St. Paul*, wherein we have a full Assurance, that *Death* to a good Christian is a certain *Gain*.

That holy Apostle, when he wrote this *Epistle* to the *Philippians*, was then Prisoner * at *Rome* for the Sake of the Christian Religion, which he had preached and planted in so many Countries with an undaunted Courage, and indefatigable Zeal, sparing neither his Labours, nor even his own Life.

As he did not know then what would be the Issue of his *Bonds*, so he was preparing to submit

* He had been seized at *Jerusalem* in the Feast of *Pentecost*, in the Year of our vulgar *Æra* LVI. as I take it.

willingly to the Event, either *Life*, or *Death*; being confident, as he assures the *Philippians*, in the foregoing Verses, that all those Sufferings of his, would turn to his greatest Good and Advantage, to his own *Salvation*, and to the Glory of *Christ*, his Master, *whether by Life, or by Death*. The Reason and Motive of this Confidence he gives in the Verse of my Text; *For, says he, to me to live is Christ, and to die is Gain*. That is to say, that if *St. Paul* should live any longer Time in this World, he would continue to spend his Life wholly to the Service and Honour of *Christ*, who by his *Spirit* so animated *St. Paul*, that he makes this Declaration to the *Galatians*, Chap. ii. 20. *I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me*.

No Wonder therefore, if to such a Man, so united with *Christ*, *Death*, whenever it should come, would be a *Gain*; since thereby he was still to be more particularly *present* with *Christ* in Heaven, the Place of true Glory and Happiness, where he would find the certain Reward of his Labours and Sufferings.

'Tis true, *St. Paul* speaks here only of himself: *To me, to live is Christ, and to die is Gain*. Nevertheless, what I am going to observe upon the latter Part of the Verse, will prove, that every good Christian may and ought to have the same Assurance, that *Death* shall be to him a sure *Gain*.

Therefore

Therefore first of all let us consider, what *Death* is in itself to all good Christians. Is it only the Destruction of our *Body*, that fine Machine, so wonderfully composed, and so artfully moving and acting? Is *Death* only the Demolisher of all the Injoyments, Pleasures, and Hopes Man can have upon Earth, where all the other Creatures are under his Command and Dominion? Is the *Grave* a full End of our Carier, wherein we rot and perish for ever, and is there beyond it no Prospect of another Life? Does *Death*, with the same Stroke, extinguish also our *Soul*, that bright Principle within us of Thoughts, Reflections, and even of all our real Joys and Pleasures? O! then indeed, if it be so, if the whole Man, *Soul* and *Body*, sink in the same Pit, turn to Dust, and rise no more; then, I say, *Death* must truly be the *King of Terrors*, and the greatest Evil that can befall Mankind.

But to whom is it, that *Death* has such a dreadful Aspect? Not to the most ignorant *Heathens*, who all over the World, and in all Ages, believed the Immortality of the *Soul*, and made it the Foundation of all their various Religions and Ceremonies.

'Tis not especially to a Christian, that *Death* appears under such a dismal Shape. For, besides the Light and Arguments of natural Reason, the Christian Religion has that peculiar Advantage, to have brought into Light and Evidence the true *Life and Immortality* of Men, to have taught clearly and distinctly, that Man is a Compound of two different

Parts, of a corruptible *Body*, and of an immortal *Soul*; and that when we *die*, there is but a *Separation* for a Time between them; so that our *Body* returns to the *Earth*, of which it was first made, and our *Soul* goes into another World, that of a good Man to Heaven, to God the *Father of Spirits*, (Eccl. xii. 7.) there to partake of his glorious Bliss, till a general *Resurrection* unites again the *Soul* with the *Body*, to be together afterwards eternally happy.

This is the Sum of the comfortable Doctrine, and of the blessed *Promises* manifestly revealed in the *Gospel*, and offered not only to St. *Paul*, or his Fellow-Disciples, but also to all true Believers, and sincere Christians. St. *Paul* himself declares it, (2 *Tim.* iv. 8.) *Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous Judge shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.*

That being certain, and so often repeated in the *New Testament*, and every Day urged to you in the Instructions you hear from the Pulpit; let us, in the second Place compare together the *Loss* and the *Gain* of a Good Christian, when *Death*, considered under the Gospel-Views, comes to cut off the Thread of his temporal Life. What is it we *lose* then, is it not infinitely less valuable, than what we *gain* thereby? 'Tis an easy Matter to find it out, even to the meanest Capacities, if it be but slightly reflected upon.

Consider

Consider then a little with me, first, what we *lose* by *Death*. We *lose* a *Body*, which, it must be confess'd, is one of the finest Works of God's Creation; shewing the infinite Power and Wisdom of his Maker, who fitted it for many excellent Uses and Injoyments, which then utterly cease, with all our bodily Sensations and Pleasures.

Then likewise we *lose* all the Comforts of *Society*, for which Man seems to be purposely placed in this World: We *lose* the sweet, the beneficial Effects and Productions of the Love, Union, Company, and Conversation of our Relations and Friends.

Some few Men besides, *losing* their Life, *lose* plentiful Estates, great Honours, and high Dignities, given to their Birth, or acquired by their shining Merit; and which had drawn to them the necessary humble Dependence, the pleasing outward Signs of Respect and Esteem, and the flattering Applauses and Praises of many, fawning upon them and courting their Fortune.

But on the other Hand, consider secondly, how many Things, attending this Life, lessen the Weight of those and such like *Losses*, caused by *Death*.

That *Body*, which too many are so fond of, with all the Perfections that can be ascribed to it, that *Body* is but a tottering *House of Clay*, a weak and frail *Tabernacle*, continually declining, and daily worn out by the very Springs which make it move and work, and by the very Foods and other Means used for its Preservation; as well as by the Injoyments

ments of the most natural Pleasures : Our Body, moreover, is exposed and subject to a various infinite Number of Infirmities and Diseases ; some of which bring a sudden Destruction in the Middle, or even at the Beginning of our Career ; as some other Distempers make our Life languish several Years in racking Pains and exquisite Torments. Is it then a *Loss*, to be freed at once by *Death* from such a sad Condition ? Who would not then look upon *Death* as the greatest, the sweetest *Gain*, but those miserable Wretches, who live in this World without a God, or any Hopes ?

Again, consider the many Fears, Concerns, Troubles, and Sorrows we are exposed to, by the Ties and Bonds of *Society*. Supposing we have several kind Relations, and true sincere Friends, which is a Happiness seldom met with ; yet the more we have of them, the more are we disturbed and disquieted, either by the fatal Accidents which now and then happen to one or t'other of them, or by the Calamities and Distempers common to humane Nature, or at last by their *Death*, which leaves to us but the mournful Tokens of their lost Love and Friendship.

To all these join another Consideration, in respect to those few Men living in Wealth and Honour. Pray, how slippery is their Station ; how uncertain their Condition ; how many publick or private sad Accidents and dismal Calamities come often to pull down those mighty Idols of Gold and Silver, and break them to Pieces, and to Dust ? Riches and Dignities have often their black *Wings*, they fly away withal, leaving their Possessors naked, empty, and

and despised by those very Followers and Flatterers, who worshipped only the vain Phantom of their Fortune, and not the Persons or Merits of their Patrons. And even in the Possession and Injoyment of Plenty and Honour, under what Anxiety and Fear of *future Evils* do most of the Great Men live, knowing, by daily Experience, that if one stands to-day, he may fall the next, and lose all his Fortune, by unforeseen Chances and Changes, so common to humane Affairs and Grandeur.

To confirm and strengthen all those Considerations, shall I add what every Body knows so well, and feels daily? namely, the Shortness and Uncertainty of our *Life* itself. And, indeed, supposing some Men should to their Death keep a full uninterrupted Possession of all possible Injoyments and Blessings; yet our *Life* itself is so short, and vanishes away with that Swiftneſs and Rapidity, that ſeldom Men have time enough to take a true Taſte of the pure Pleaſures of a reaſonable Life, after they have given over the poor empty Occupations of Infancy and Youth.

Hence it is, that in Scripture our *Life* is elegantly compared to a *Shadow* (1 Chr. xxix. 15. Job xiv. 2.) to a *Sleep*, to a *Tale* (Pſal. xc. 4, 59.) to a *Vapour* (James iv. 14.) to a *Flower*, which in the *Morning flouriſhes*, and in the *Evening is cut down and withers* (Job xiv. 2. Pſal. xc. 6.)

Now putting together all thoſe Obſervations, I expoſed to your View, does it not thereby evidently appear, that, if by *Death* we *loſe* any thing, however

ever 'tis worth but little in itself, and that even the very *Loss* may truly be call'd a sure *Gain*; especially in respect to the most Part of Mankind, who get their Living at the painful Sweat of their Eyebrows, and groan continually under so many Hardships, Troubles, Sorrows, and Miseries. As of these may be particularly said what *Job* (xiv. 1.) spoke in general, that *Man born of a Woman, is of few days and full of trouble*; so of the same we may justly affirm, that they must be *Gainers* by *Death*, which brings them a full Rest and Freedom of all the Calamities and real Evils, they were exposed to during their short sorrowful Life.

This Truth shall still be better confirmed, if, thirdly and lastly, we put in t'other Scale, the vast, real, Advantages, and the extraordinary Blessings, which a Good Christian *gains*, when he *dies*.

Do but hearken to what is said thereupon in *St. John's Revelations* (xiv. 13.) *I heard a voice from heaven, saying unto me, write: Blessed are the dead, who die in the Lord from henceforth; yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.*

Mark well, that those who *die in the Lord*, in his Faith, in the Principles of his Religion, and in the Practice of his holy Precepts; those *rest from their Labours*. They *labour* no more with the bodily Diseases, with the worldly Trouble, Miseries, and Calamities; with no manner of fleshly Evils. Neither do they *labour* any more within themselves with the Cares, the Fears, the Sorrows of Mind,

with

with Sin, with Error, with unruly Passions, with the Remorses of Conscience, with the tormenting Reflections of Penitence. From all these, and the like sorrowful, common, constant, and daily Attendants of humane Life, do Good Christians get a perfect *Rest*, when they die.

And, secondly, what compleats their Happiness, is, that *their Works do follow them*, and consequently procure to them the greatest Rewards, that a most just God, a most merciful Lord, and a most indulgent Father can bestow upon his faithful Servants, and dutiful Children; according to his free gracious Promises made in the Gospel by his beloved Son, our Saviour. Thereby the pious *Souls*, immediately after their Separation from the *Bodies*, are admitted into the heavenly Palace of God, into the most immediate and glorious Presence of his divine Majesty.

There, even during the State of Separation, the good Souls, being with the Lord, at the Fountain of all Blessings, they must be in the most ravishing Injoyments of a clearer *Knowledge* of God's infinite Perfections, of a more extensive *Love* of so bountiful a Being, their Maker and Redeemer, and of the purest *Pleasures* that a reasonable Soul can be filled with. Of all which Blessedness, their *Bodies* also shall at last be made Partakers, after a general Resurrection. Then our Saviour shall *change our vile Body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious Body*, as St. Paul assures us in the third Chapter of this Epistle to the *Philippians*, Ver. 21. Then, according

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cording to the same Apostle's Declaration, 2 *Cor.* v. then instead of our present mortal *Body*, of that *Earthly House* and weak *Tabernacle*, tending continually towards a *Dissolution*, we shall have a *Body*, which shall be truly a *Building of God*, a *House not made with Hands*, eternal in the *Heavens*, where being immediately framed by God's infinite Power, it will be capable of the Injoyments of a glorious and everlasting Life. For *this is the promise the Lord has promised us, life, even eternal life*, as *St. John* tells us, 1 *Epist.* ii. 25. Then, as our Saviour himself says, *Matt.* xiii. 43. then *shall the righteous shine forth as the sun, in the kingdom of their Father*. There they shall sit like Kings on heavenly Thrones, with Crowns upon their Heads, and Palms in their Hands, singing continually the joyful *Alleluïas*, the eternal Praises of their merciful God, in the Society of Angels, and all the glorified Saints.

Such is the glorious, the blessed, the most comfortable Prospect, which a Good Christian may have through *Death* itself. Who then in his right Senses should not be willing to be *absent from the Body*, and to be *with the Lord*? Who would not with Joy be ready to leave and despise this World, with all its Pomp and Glory? Who would not despise *Death* itself, and long for our *Dissolution*?

But if seriously and earnestly we desire the Possession of such a glorious happy Condition, then let us not forget, that as long as we are in the *Flesh*, we must resolve and endeavour to live according to

the holy Rules of the Gospel, *soberly, righteously, and godly*. In a Word, we must do our best to live so Christianly, that we may say, Christ lives in us, our Life is intirely governed by Christ, so that we are moved and inspired by his Spirit of Holiness and Sanctification, *without which no Man can see God*, and enjoy his Glory and Happiness.

To encourage us in all those christian Endeavours after a regular Life, and that we may by Death be made Partakers of the eternal Bliss, let us set before our Eyes the Patterns of our Imitation, given us by those deceased Persons, who lived so constantly in the same pious Endeavours, that we may have all the Reason imaginable to believe, that dying in the Lord, their *Death* was to them a sure *Gain*.

Among those Models we cannot fail to place that Honourable Lady, we mourn for at present. As *Her* Memory ought justly to be among us in *blessing*; so we cannot better honour *Her*, than by gratefully remembering, and carefully cherishing, by our Imitation, those Virtues, which we saw shining in *Her* Life, and reflecting upon us by *Her* Beneficence.

Born with a superior *Genius*, which she soon cultivated by her Education, under tender and careful Parents, and by early conversing with some of the brightest Men of the Age; she acquired such Accomplishments, as put *Her* much above the common Level of *Her* own Sex, and made *Her* capable of the best Performances, that true and solid Wit can produce. Quick and regular in *Her* Thoughts, exact and judicious in *Her* Expressions, obliging and polite.

polite in *Her* Behaviour, she never fail'd to please in Conversation, whenever the Occasion offered to shine without Affectation. *Her* Judgment piercing and solid, never, or seldom, fail'd to give right and sure Decisions, either of Things, or Persons, easily and certainly distinguishing the sincere Friend from the false one, tho' never so artfully disguised.

And yet, for all those uncommon Endowments, she did not think it below *Herself*, or Fortune, to be perfectly instructed, and to act accordingly, in the Oeconomy of *Her* Family, and in the due Decencies of the Government of *Her* domestick Affairs. Nor was she the less capable of giving good Counsel and wise Advice in other worldly Concerns; insomuch that *Her* worthy Consort frankly owns, that in the losing of *Her*, He *lost the great and wise Conductor of His Life and Fortune, under God's all-wise Providence.*

I thus mentioned the excellent Qualifications of *Her* Mind, not only because they are most valuable Blessings, not often seen together in the same Subject, but especially because I would have you observe, that *Her* Religion and Piety could not be, but the Choice of *Her* Reason and Judgment, and not the mere Production of the blind Chance of *Her* Birth and Education. This Observation is the more necessary, because some miserable ignorant Scoffers at all that is good, dare pretend, that our Religion cannot stand the Trial of refin'd Wit and polish'd Reason. This foolish Pretension, as ill-grounded

grounded as impious, is confuted by many Examples, and particularly by this we speak of.

And indeed, as that worthy deceas'd Person was no less judicious and reasonable in this great Concern of Religion, than in other worldly Affairs; so she knew how to keep the safe middle Way between Profaneness and Superstition, equally distant from both those bad Extremes. But at the same Time stedfast in the true Principles of our Faith, *She* did not, when *Her* Health permitted, neglect the publick Exercises, and sacred Rites of our Church; always behaving *Herself* with that Humility, Decency, and Seriousness, which become rational Creatures, solemnly appearing before the supreme Majesty of an Almighty and most Merciful God. And we have another eminent and sure Token of *Her* Piety and religious Love for our Church, in the precious Gifts she has left for our Communion Plate, and other rich and decent Ornaments.

From the same Source, from *Her* religious Dispositions, and pious constant Endeavours of doing Good, sprung out also the many Effusions of *Her* compassionate Charity to those in Sicknes and Adversity, most particularly to those of this *Parish*. And, in general, there is scarce any amongst you but found, that the Deceas'd, far from being proud and puffed up with the Wealth and Fortune she liv'd in, on the contrary, she always shewed a condescending, gracious, obliging Temper and Carriage, putting *Herself*, in a manner, upon the same Level with those of an inferior Rank, she often admitted.

To

To these excellent and so rare Virtues, let us add *Her* great and Christian *Patience* and Resignation in the constant painful Diseases, under which she laboured and languished, during so many Years, till the last Stroke of an untimely *Death*, in the Flower of *Her* Age, carried *Her* away from *Her* afflicted Friends, to the Place of *Her* eternal Rest and Happiness.

But let us not forget her eminent constant *Conjugal Love*, which so evidently appeared in that perfect Union betwixt that Honourable Couple. Hence it is, that the surviving Part, tho' *He* has done so much, and even to the impairing of His own Health, thinks yet, He can scarce shew enough the profound Esteem, Value, and Love He had for such a deserving Merit, so well known to Him, by the sweet Experience of several Years.

Judge now, from so bright and glorious a Character, tho' I omit a great deal more ; judge, whether I could recommend a better Pattern to your pious grateful Remembrance and religious Imitation.

God grant, that by his Blessing upon our earnest Endeavours after Holiness, we may lead the rest of our Life so Christian-like, that at last *Death* may also be to us a perfect *Gain*, and introduce us into the heavenly Place of eternal Rest and Happiness.

And to God our most merciful Saviour be ascribed, as most due, Honour, Glory, Praise, and Dominion, now and for ever.

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